



(U) Write Right: Don't Change 'Happy' to 'Glad'

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of the Reporting Board (S12A)
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(U//FOUO) Editors get used to being regarded as hopelessly old-fashioned martinets who delight in reducing writing to the lowest common denominator. Well, that's life. We who strive for absolute clarity in one reading have to accept this characterization in the interests of the customer. Having said that, however, we acknowledge that some of us may be guilty of change for the sake of change. To these disciples of H.G. Wells ("No passion on earth, no love or hate, is stronger than the passion to change someone else's draft"), we warn against the phenomenon known as "changing happy to glad."

(U//FOUO) **Make your changes substantive.** They should improve the clarity and the readability of the piece, not merely reflect stylistic preferences (although you may sometimes find yourself explaining patiently that "would of went" is not just a matter of preference, it's incorrect -- but that's part of the job). Think about whether your intended audience would know, for instance, what a martinet is...and if there's any doubt, choose another expression (e.g. nit-picker, rigid rule enforcer).

(S//SI) Be particularly wary of inserting colloquial expressions in product reports. A British colleague recalls a strand of reporting where NSA was wholly dependent on cryptanalytic and language skills available only at GCHQ; the Brits used to share translated decrypts with the NSA Target Office of Primary Interest, who issued far more of them than the GCHQ TOPI, and in which, naturally, U.S. spellings would replace the British ones.

(U//FOUO) He was amused when one text that he had sent over the pond included the phrase "would be dismissed." The NSA reporter had changed this to "would receive a pink slip." Our British correspondent had to tell his NSA counterpart that to a UK or Commonwealth reader this would imply only a pastel-colored lady's undergarment. Think about this pitfall if your product report's distro list includes Second Parties. (If, on the other hand, you're writing a reassuring announcement from the Human Resources Department about increasing the attrition rate, such an expression might not be out of place. The point is to consider your particular audience.)

(U//FOUO) Now for the other side of the story: **writers, don't fall in love with your own words.** Learn to recognize good editing by thinking of your target audience; does a change -- that, yes, might suppress your brilliant flourishes -- make the piece dearer, more succinct, more thorough? Keep in mind the words of Dr. Samuel Johnson: "Read your own compositions, and when you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."

(U//FOUO) For more advice on writing and reporting, see [The Reporting Page](#) and [The Reporting Forum](#).



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